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# Mississippi River High-Speed Corridor included in MnDOT Statewide Rail Plan

## **MnDOT plan defines a unified vision for future transit projects across Minnesota that will create jobs and strengthen the economy**

Saint Paul, Minn. – Plans to create a high-speed rail connection between Chicago and St. Paul are a key part of a new, statewide plan for future rail and transit projects. Today, the Minnesota Department of Transportation released its comprehensive rail plan that calls for a coordinated investment in rail transit across the state.

MnDOT's plan proposes a unified vision that integrates multiple types and routes of transportation, including high-speed, light rail, commuter, and freight transit.

"Ramsey County congratulates MnDOT on the development and release of its State Rail Plan," said County Commissioner Jim McDonough, chair of the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority. "We are excited to see the state's commitment to a comprehensive passenger rail system that includes a Twin Cities to Chicago high-speed rail connection."

"A good bit of work has been done that says to Minnesota, 'We're one Minnesota, and we are going to connect the state,'" said State Representative Alice Hausman. "We see the rail plan as the first step of linking all regions of Minnesota."

"This plan is an example of what can happen when the private and public sector work together," said Dan Scott, Chairperson of the Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce. "Improving transit will help our region create jobs, spark new economic development, and keep our marketplace economically competitive. MnDOT's plan helps define a collective vision for Minnesota to make sure we can effectively compete for the federal resources we will need to move projects forward."

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The plan specifically identifies the Mississippi River corridor high-speed rail upgrades as a Tier 1 project that is eligible for the first round of investment via the America's Reinvestment Recovery Act (ARRA).

"MnDOT's plan is a significant milestone for a project that represents the future of our region. As the federal government continues to study these routes, it now falls to all of us to take our message to Washington that high-speed rail along the Mississippi River Route ending at the Union Depot is the best option to connect our region and grow our economy," said Saint Paul Mayor Chris Coleman.

### **About MnDOT's Plan**

MnDOT began working on the plan after the Minnesota Legislature mandated that MnDOT prepare and submit a comprehensive statewide freight and passenger rail plan during the 2008 session. Federal funding guidelines also required Minnesota to complete a plan in order for the state to be eligible for federal transportation funding.

To create the plan, MnDOT officials studied a number of different transportation projects across the state, demographic information, and federal funding guidelines to compile a fact-based plan that will benefit the entire state.

"By utilizing the state's data-driven process, the existing and highly successful Amtrak route along the Mississippi River will be selected as the most cost-effective and shovel-ready route to Chicago," said McDonough.

"MnDOT's State Rail Plan echoes the findings from numerous other studies that identified the Mississippi River route as a viable high-speed rail route. The River Route continues to show high ridership potential and profitability. Most importantly, track upgrades on the River Route will benefit current and future high-speed, passenger, and freight rail. That's a three-for-one investment," said Winona Mayor Jerry Miller, who also chairs the Minnesota High-Speed Rail Commission.

In addition to the fact-finding process, planners also held a series of meetings across Minnesota in which thousands of people commented on the proposals. This feedback was then incorporated into the plan.

"There was involvement from communities all across the state of Minnesota. That input was invaluable," said State Senator Katie Sieben.

MnDOT planners specifically looked for projects that met the eligibility requirements for ARRA funding as Tier 1 projects. To be classified as Tier 1, projects must be capital improvements that have passed a project-level environmental review in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and are ready to be implemented.

"When we look at the plan that we put forward and how it competes on a federal basis with routes across the country, the Chicago to Twin Cities route is absolutely critical," said State Senator Kathy Saltzman.

The proposed renovations to Saint Paul's Union Depot and additional work to complete high speed rail upgrades to the Mississippi River corridor will be the first two projects submitted by MnDOT for ARRA funding.

- ***Union Depot:*** Saint Paul's historic Union Depot was once a bustling hub for the region's rail traffic. The proposed renovations will transform the train station into a multi-modal transportation hub with facilities for Amtrak, commuter, high speed and light rail transit.
- ***Mississippi River Route:*** This project includes high speed rail upgrades to the Mississippi River Route, from Saint Paul through Hastings, Red Wing, and Winona and east through Wisconsin to Chicago. State and regional officials have been developing this plan for years, and it is the most cost-effective route to connect Saint Paul and Chicago via high speed rail.

"The amount of work already done in the Mississippi River corridor will be a great advantage for us in seeking funding," said Hausman.

"Over 90% of the track already reaches 60 miles per hour or more so making that relatively minimal investment to get up to 100 or 110 miles per hour makes the most economic sense," said Sieben.

MnDOT's plan also identifies a number of transit corridors and projects that would create new transit options. Future projects include the extension of the North Star Commuter Rail Corridor to St. Cloud, the development of a high-speed rail connection between Rochester and the Twin Cities, further development of the Northern Lights project, and commuter rail service between St. Paul and Hastings.

MnDOT officials also dedicated a significant portion of the plan to efforts to expand and increase freight rail capacity across the state. Minnesota is a key part of the national freight rail system at a time when demand to ship freight by rail is stretching system capacity. Work to upgrade the Mississippi River corridor for high-speed rail will also expand and improve the corridor's freight capacity.

### **Benefits of MnDOT's Plan**

MnDOT's comprehensive statewide plan offers a coordinated, sequential approach to the numerous projects proposed throughout the state. The unified vision will give Minnesota's congressional delegation a better chance to secure funding for all projects within the plan.

MnDOT estimates that the plan will create more than 1,500 permanent jobs and hundreds of construction jobs in Minnesota. Additionally, the new and renovated lines will encourage development and stimulate the economy in communities across Minnesota. Experts from the Minnesota High Speed Rail Commission estimate that the proposed upgrades to the Mississippi River route will generate four dollars for every dollar spent.

"In terms of farebox recovery and the investment the state would make, the river route's payoff is the greatest," said Sieben.

"Investment in this corridor will create jobs, increase freight capacity, benefit Red Rock Commuter Rail, and improve safety," said McDonough.

The statewide plan will also redefine Minnesota as a preeminent transportation hub. Historically, Saint Paul's rail connections helped the state's capitol city become a gateway to the west. Now, the city's freight lines have reached capacity, and an increased demand for freight traffic has created the need for expanded rail capabilities.

"It is clear from the increased amount of commitment to the existing River Route for high-speed rail that MnDOT shares our view that the River Corridor is not only the most shovel-ready option, but the most valuable in terms of creating jobs and economic opportunity for our state," said Miller. "We look forward to further discussing the state's best option for high-speed rail with state legislators and our federal lawmakers."

**About On Board Midwest**

On Board Midwest is a coalition of businesses, elected officials, organizations, and individuals who support the proposed high-speed rail line project connecting Saint Paul and Chicago.

For more information please visit [www.onboardmidwest.com](http://www.onboardmidwest.com).

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